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THE STREET DANCE

JEROME MYERS

COLLECTION OF JAMES SPEYER, ESQ.

JEROME MYERS

BY GUY PÈNE DU BOIS

NO art occurrence of recent years here has so thoroughly ruffled our placid attitude toward art in general as did the exhibition of Modern Art held in the Armory of the Sixty-ninth Infantry Regiment. The extremists of the varied gathering mirrored in the minds of those who viewed them sentiments very similar to those they expressed. The layman and the artist alike were put out of step. Art seemed to have bridged a chasm beyond which lay the pinnacle of glory or the grave of oblivion. For the first time in our history official artists, losing their composure and forgetting to laugh, became angry. Here was the gravest and the newest insult to art. The Independents ever on the lookout for the new, ever ready to cheer the "fearless," found here an outlet for an exuberance long suppressed. A great many of this side of art's battle-

field cast caution aside along with theories cherished for a lifetime. Only indifferent onlookers smiled or laughed outright. These saw neither good nor bad in the new movement. It was different and, in comparison to all precedent, grotesque, nothing more nor less. Groups of artists in the armory argued a great deal and questioned more. Mr. Chase, the sixth time, left the show angrier than he did the first. Mr. Davies became more and more enchanted.

It is characteristic of Jerome Myers, whom this article concerns, that, amid the turmoil all the time, he remained the one man who neither questioned nor ridiculed nor praised nor blamed the new art. Quietly and inauspiciously he studied it. He found good and bad and balanced them with the art that he knew or, better still, with life. Above everything or rather despite everything he re-

mained Jerome Myers, a sane and a sincere man. The conveyance he employs to carry his ideas to us may change a little; in time, it may change a lot; but we may be certain that it will not change until he has adapted it to suit his own purpose, and that is until it will convey to you and to me the desired expression.

Mr. Myers is a real Independent. He speaks a language at once direct, forceful and individual. By this I mean that it is neither a borrowed nor influenced language given this or that turn by the fad of the hour. The makers of indexes, who have found the words cubism, futurism, post-impressionism along with a great galaxy of isms and applied them with as much relevancy as they did in years past the word impressionism, have put Jerome Myers in the pigeonhole allotted to the realists. He does not belong there. With Mr. Arthur B. Davies and one or two others in America he is to be pointed out as an artist whose inspiration has been borrowed from nature without an introduction from a school of painting, of preconceived ideas that would have made everything easier for him. He has fought and is fighting, for the battle is far from over, alone, bowing neither to the right nor to the left, compromising with the art or the lay public neither in his speech nor in his ideals. I mean here that he is not what the writers term a library philosopher, and which in the case of an artist would stand very well by supplanting "library" with museum.

He has studied pictures but he has not plagiarized from pictures. Our artists have followed, like our modistes, styles set in the French capital. Once in a while as a mark of independence, perhaps, they have swerved from France to Germany—we have suffered the effects of the Düsseldorf school as much as any nation—or gone over to England or to Italy to study the Florentines. Mr. Myers went to London and to Paris and hated them both. He did not want an artistic atmosphere which to him must have been a fog—a veil drawn over the nakedness of nature. Back in America

the struggle for existence precluded the possibility of that fog. Life as he knew it from boyhood up was here scarred with lines inflicted by defeat or made beautiful by the not less deep ones earned in a victorious struggle. He had run away from a home left nearly destitute by a father who appeared there, at rare intervals, to tell vague stories of riches to accrue from mines in California. He had been through the mill when New York saw him first. He was to go through it here again and again. But he was to lose none of his ideals and to realize many of them.

The art that surrounded him when he began to produce pictures some twenty years ago owed its thesis to an idealism that, with no basic foundation in fact or in nature, had become superficial and puerile. The majority of Americans returning here from Paris brought with them a thorough academic training received at the hands of Laurens or Bouguereau or Gerome. Technique had formed for them an opaque wall with life and its human imperfections on the other side an unknown and an unconsidered quantity. Beauty then was a matter to be secured and stamped on canvas not by the study of nature but by strict adherence to the rule book of proportions and of values. Truth, when Truth entered at all into the propaganda, trooped into the photographer's field and reproduced details in the manner of Meissonier or of J. G. Brown, cast off the artist's right to select and to omit and became commonplace reproduction.

Young Myers labored all day at varied occupations to earn his daily bread. (One of his chums of that time is still selling lavender at the same stand in Fourteenth Street. Myers' Mission Tent is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—but that is another story.) At night he divided his time between the Art Students' League and the public libraries. Always he gathered some atom of learning and never, I am certain, did he take anything for granted. He has never spent time playing, in the ordinary sense—indeed the one exercise of his youth was walking—but may it not be that in



PLAYGROUND, HUDSON STREET PARK, NEW YORK

JEROME MYERS

the study of people he found the relaxation we all require?

For the greater part of his life he has lived and worked among the poor. Thus he may be said to be a painter of the poor by sympathy rather than by design. He has been described slightly as a painter of street scenes—he is and is not. He is rather a painter of a people. Moreover it seems to me that the title painter itself is fit subject for quarrel—it is too definite. Mr. Myers is a painter incidentally. The important thing—the significant thing—about Mr. Myers is not technical, which the word painter must suggest. The important and significant thing about Mr. Myers is the thing that he has to say. Insisting on this I must insist that whether he expresses himself through painting, writing or music is matter of little moment.

He has been or rather is called a realist. Now realism centers more or less

about what are called the facts of life. All realists make a boast of truth—some follow its shadow with fidelity, like dogs, and render superficial aspects of the obvious parrotwise; others take the essence of it and build a better resemblance. I think that realists are troubled least of all painters by that troublesome thing the selection of subject matter, for realism with its generous eyes wide open encompasses the whole of nature. A realist like Robert Henri paints a painted lady, who is a natural symbolist, a masquerader, or a very real working man, with the same unprejudiced love—the face and the mask are alike fit subjects for his brush. Everything that lives and breathes, no matter the shell, every aspect of humanity, looms up big to the comprehensive eye of such a realist—a thing worth while. He is a realist, I think, by chance; he is not in love with realism in life, he is rather in love



THE NIGHT MISSION

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

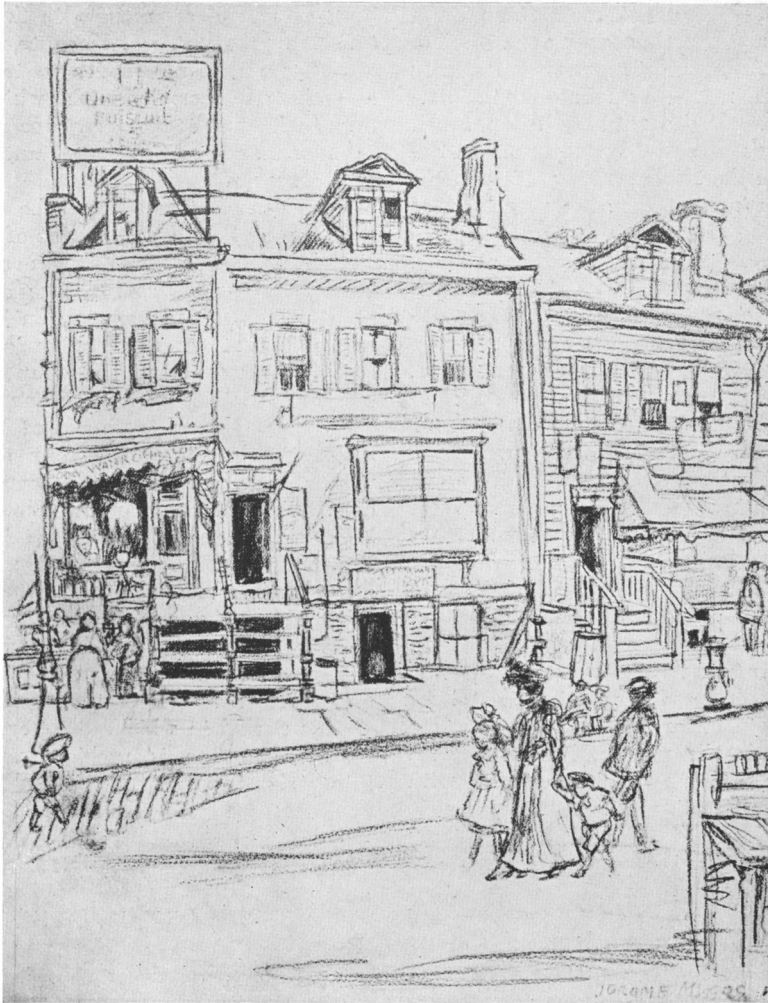
JEROME MYERS

with realism in the abstract, I mean realism in reproduction.

It is here that Jerome Myers, who, to an extent, is a classicist, seems the greater realist and is the greater realist at heart. He has no patience with powder and paint, no patience with the hair dresser, the manicure and the beauty doctor, nor yet with another weapon employed to destroy reality—the suave social etiquette. He is Diogenes with the lantern, but more successful than the classic figure for he seeks not moral honesty but the honesty of the sincere man blurting out his evil along with his good. That is another reason why, perhaps, he has been particularly attracted to the lower East Side of New York City, where sham, I mean the masquerader's sham, is less apparent than elsewhere. The sociologist may battle with this last statement, claiming the existence of a comparative similarity in all of the many

stations of the social railway, and have to an extent the better end of the battle. You may anyway find analogies wherever you seek them. The symbolist's search, carried over an inevitably fruitful field, must perforce yield results. And it seems to me that poverty is a friend to reality and allied with it most fiercely in the defeat of sham. A starved stomach might be said tritely to be no respecter of persons, and synonymously likely to reign despotically over the vain whims at play-acting of the muscles of a sorely tried face.

And then civilization, leaving aside the question of its place on the honorary scale, the great suppresser of primitive emotion, gains ground but slowly where the idea of existence is linked with unbreakable iron to that of struggle. The open-hearted, open-faced children of the world are to be found most readily among the poor, among those held to the



OLD HOUSE, CLINTON AND DELANCY STREETS. A DRAWING BY JEROME MYERS

grindstone by a not always victorious battle for life, who have little time for culture, and less stomach for its subtle twists, so many and so varied; for self-analysis a mirror in which man often as not loses his personality, his sincerity, his sense of truth.

Down along the piers of the East River made free to a people to whom even smoke-tainted fresh air is a treat, in congested streets, walled in by houses pouring humanity or its evidences from every aperture, in city parks where, wise or unwise as you will, missionary societies regulate the play of children and, by

suppression, wise or unwise again, are beginning to instill the rudiments of higher civilization, Myers finds his subjects—finds the essential realism.

Now, out of this particular choice of subject, or from a misunderstanding of its purport, has arisen the charge—it is made detrimentally by numbers—that Myers is employing art—that has come despite Tolstoy to mean a disinterested expression—to further socialism. Perhaps that should be termed a misuse of art, perhaps not—I do not know. The majority deriding the purposeful art of England says that it is. However that

may be, Myers as an artist is nothing better nor worse than a humanist and a realist. And he is nothing better nor worse as a man—the man and the artist are as they should be inseparable. The charge of socialism naturally is derived from the idea that Myers is preaching the propriety, nay, the necessity, of helping the poor to a better existence by a more equal division of the spoils, by painting their misery, their abjectness, the squalid dejection of their present state and thus moving sympathy.

As a matter of fact Myers, more than, I am sure, a very great many of us, believes that the poor are very well as they are, that the East Side is very well as it is. He is not in sympathy with the work of the rich invaders of it who judge from their own standards, nor yet with that association whose representatives are stationed at public playgrounds there to teach children how to become rid of superfluous energy, how to play, that is, by forcing upon them constraint in the form of rules and regulations, set laws by which to fetter youthful impulse. He understands the people, has lived with them, been happy or sorrowful with them. His pictures show that the balance of joy and distress is as evenly kept there as it is elsewhere.

He paints a Recreation Pier and a bread line, a concert at the Mall in Central Park, a Mission Tent in the heart of the Ghetto, a playground surrounded by iron fences and containing formal buildings, a street in which the houses are aged, wrinkled, characterful, sincere as their occupants; he paints children dancing with graceful natural gestures to the tune of a street organ, and their parents asleep on a pier at night, exhausted but at last joyfully breathing that fresh air that after all is free to everyone.

To the East Side he is a familiar figure, sketch book ever prominent, noting down intimate aspects of the people, appreciative impressions quickly seen, quickly drawn, succinctly expressed.

His drawings are to be numbered among the richest of the time, rich in

impression and expression, in those tell-tale details, puny, worthless, to the man who has made of breadth in treatment a technical formula with which life, despite its persistent arrogance may not interfere and yet so important to the real observer.

The other extreme from the drawing of Myers is the decorative line of Aubrey Beardsley. The Englishman gathered abstract theories from nature and created out of them an expression in which one feels that grace and originality were not only sought but insisted upon. The originality of Myers is spontaneous, it is born of his love of truth and of his overwhelming desire to reproduce sincerely without fanfare, without too much rhetoric, the ideas that nature conveys to him. His line, like the line in Rembrandt's etchings, is never hard, never superfluous and always intimate—a line at once sensitive and appreciative. Also it is, at times, timid and always reverential—the line of the humble man, the appreciator, to whom the cocksureness of this period in which, fitted or unfitted for it, everyone is rushing, pell mell, into an expression of opinion, must be exceedingly distasteful.

FRENCH ART IN AMERICA

The Museum of French Art, under the direction of the French Institute in the United States, will hold in January an exhibition of French laces, ancient and modern, as well as an exhibition of Beauvais tapestries, arranged through the assistance of the French Government, in its galleries, 400 Madison Avenue, New York.

During the month of February an exhibition of the works of French painters, which is to be made an annual event, will be held in connection with an exhibition of modern French architectural works arranged by the Société des Architectes Diplômés par le Gouvernement.

In March there will be an annual exhibition of the works of the members of the museum.